

Political Power and the Industrial Development of Cultural Artifacts in China

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ABSTRACT With national policy support on industries that produce cultural goods and artifacts, Chinese industries have developed quickly in recent decades. Some cities and their industries are led by the central government, while others are led by the local government. In this paper, the author uses ceramic industry clusters in Jingdezhen city (central-led) and Longquan city (local-led) as a comparative study to illustrate the political power relations of government-led cultural artifact industry development in China. In sum, the excessive emphasis on political hierarchy and centralized control of production management will weaken the cultural essence of the local cultural artifacts. The localized government-led development strategy is positive to preserve the cultural essence and design a befitting local industry development strategy in Chinese cities.

KEYWORDS art, China, cultural heritage, local government, political economy, regional government

Introduction

Culture-related industries have been considered as relevant economic procurators for measuring cities' creativity.¹ The Asia-Pacific has the largest market share in culture-related industries worldwide, generating USD 743 billion of revenue (33% of global CCI revenue) and 12.7 million jobs (43% of global CCI jobs) in 2013.²

The emphasis on cultural related industries from the Chinese government has also accelerated the rise of China as an economic and cultural power in the global market.

The first Chinese official document on *Cultural and Its Related Industries Categories* was published by the central government in 2004, which initiated the related industries' development from a national level. Three layers of cultural activities have been defined in the Chinese context, which are summarized in Figure 1: 1) Core layer, 2) Peripheral layer, and 3) Culture related layer.³

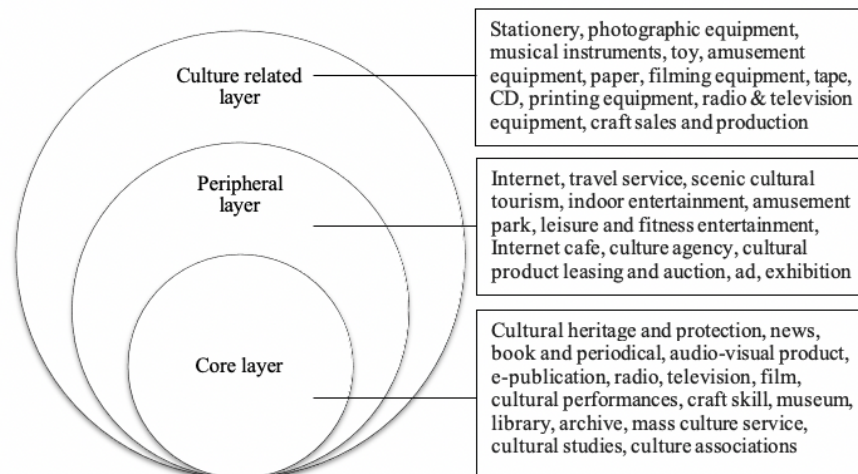


Figure 1: Three categories of Chinese culture-related industries: core, peripheral, and cultural-related layers. Source: summarized by the author from the classification of Xiong and Fu, 2012.

The ceramics industry is a representative sub-sector of Chinese culture and its related industries, since it not only belongs to the core layer of the industries' category, but also has witnessed a history of development that reflects changing national strategies.

The Chinese ceramic industry had a glorious history before the 18th century, dominating the global export share of ceramic products with its significant producing skills and high value of art.⁴ After the continuous wars in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Chinese ceramic industry was plagued by a sharp decline in production and export. Jingdezhen, known as the "Porcelain Capital," shut down hundreds of ceramic factories, and thousands of workers lost their jobs. Yixing, the "Pottery Capital," had only approximately 20 people working in ceramic production in 1949.⁵ Similar situations happened in other ceramic producing clusters in China, including Longquan in Zhejiang province, Dehua in Fujian province, and Liling in Hunan province. At the same time, Chinese ceramic products had a large declining share in the global market. Advanced industrial technology made European ceramic production gradually free from the handicraft industry after the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. Japan's porcelain production also emerged, which competed with ceramic products in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and other European countries. The diversification of ceramic development worldwide has accelerated the ceramic industry development.

After the establishment of the socialist new China, the Chinese ceramic industry went through a long process of restoration and improvement under the lead of the government. The government was centralized and highly integrated the politics, economy, and culture in mandatory ways from the 1950s to the late 1970s.⁶ At the beginning, the Chinese national capitalist economy was very limited in scale. Modern capitalist production could not be truly established, and socialized large-scale production could not be implemented. In the early 1950s there were 5,641 ceramic production enterprises in national level, of which only 172 were small-scale modern factories, accounting for 3% of the total; the remaining 5,469 enterprises—97%—were small workshops.⁷ After the initial industrialization of Chinese industries at the national level, the ceramic industry also applied the industrialized mode to its production process. The first batch of ceramic products was based on "Jianguo Porcelain" in Jingdezhen, designed by the Institute of Metallurgical Ceramics and Shanghai Institute of Industrial Engineering in 1953.⁸ These ceramic products were only allowed to be used in celebrations and on significant occasions. The design style, producing process, capital chain, and output volume are under the control of central government management.

Ceramic related state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were built in key industrial cities to carry out directions from the central government. The investment in those SOEs was entirely from the central government, and all outputs and profits belonged to the central government as well. Since there are strict and detailed requirements for industrial management and products, very few people in these enterprises cared whether the commodities they produced could be sold and allocated well in the market. Also, creative and new products have been created in a limited way because of these strictures. This relationship is visualized in Figure 2. SOEs serve the state as production machines, to maximize industrialization's profits and development in the command economy period. State officers give instructions for exactly what to produce, how much to produce, and at what price to acquire inputs, with the bureaucratic allocations from the central government to local governments.⁹ As for the role of state banks, they allocated investment input into state-owned enterprises, and made the output standards, the production levels and the prices of ceramic products set bureaucratically during the process.

Figure 2: State-owned enterprises' management framework. Source: summarized by the author from Steinfeld, 1999.

For those cities not on the list of national key industrial cities, the local government has comparatively larger autonomous power in deciding local industries' development strategy. This results in a diverging development path in Chinese cities that are led by the central government, compared to those led by the local government. In this paper, I discuss the differential influence of political power on the development of cultural artifact industries in the Chinese context, taking two ceramic industrial clusters as examples.

Methodology and Datasets

There are huge differences among provinces and cities in eastern, central, and western parts of China, since different regions have varied economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Figure 3 shows the provincial level of the performance of cultural and its related industries based on the existing Chinese evaluation system. This evaluation system considers 3 first-grade factors (i.e. industry productivity, industry influence, and industry driving force) and 8 second-grade factors from all provinces and municipalities in China. All factors are equally-weighted. Figure 3 shows the results calculated based on these factors in 2014. Those provinces/cities have performance outcome higher than 50 indicates the region has a high performance in China. Medium performance is between 30-50, and low performance has the result lower than 30. Eastern China has a comparatively better performance than other areas. To minimize the influence from geographical factors, I chose two representative ceramic industrial clusters in the eastern part of China: Jingdezhen in Jiangxi, and Longquan in Zhejiang. Both of these cities have a long history in ceramic products creation and production.

Figure 3: The culture-related industries' performance map of Chinese provinces and cities in 2014. Source: created by the author from the reports of Renmin University of China Cultural and its Related Industries Institute.¹⁰ Hong Kong (HK), Macau (MC) and Taiwan (TW) are not included.

Both quantitative and qualitative data are used in this study. Four datasets were collected. The first dataset is the spatial planning of the ceramic industrial parks in Jingdezhen in 1999, 2003, and 2016. This dataset shows the trend of the spatial distribution of ceramic industrial parks in Jingdezhen, which are owned by the state. Longquan only had one ceramic industrial park in 2003, which was built by the local government. This dataset also includes the registered ceramic firms in the ceramic industrial parks in the two cities. The data source is from the Bureau of Ceramic Industry Development in both cities, which is a unique department in the local government for the specialized ceramic preservation and development services and administrative procedures. The second dataset is the statistical reports from the national and provincial Bureau of Statistics, which is applied for the ceramic industry at the local level. The third dataset is socioeconomic information, especially with the Masters¹¹ information at the provincial level, including their gender, age, specializations, ceramic-related patents for skills or products, and related development policies and strategies. The final dataset was compiled from the official reports and documents from the State Council and China Light Industry Council published in 2003 and in 2010, interviews, field observations, and Chinese microblogging and social media platforms. Semi-structured interviews and site observations, which were based on but not limited by a prepared outline, were conducted from March to October 2018. The interviewees included provincial and local government officials; urban planners, developers, and consultants; university scholars; artists; managers; and consumers. The information from the interviews was used for qualitative analysis. The final sample included 37 face-to-face interviews lasting from 20 minutes to 2 hours. These interviews were conducted in the Chinese language and later transcribed and translated by the author. Site observations were conducted on the basis of interviews. Site observations helped the author in understanding the production of ceramics, innovation in style design, and glazing skills.¹²

Jingdezhen: Central-led Development

Jingdezhen is located in the northeastern part of Jiangxi Province, bordering Anhui Province to the north (Figure 4). According to the 2018 Jingdezhen Statistics Report on socioeconomic development, the population of this prefecture-level city is 1.66 million people.

Figure 4. Location of Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province.

For centuries, the ceramic industry has been the pillar industry of Jingdezhen. Jingdezhen's porcelain products became prosperous in the Ming¹³ dynasty. Since then, the city enjoyed a high reputation as the "Capital of Porcelain." Jingdezhen has been considered an economic and trade center since ancient times. After the suspension of production there due to wars in the early 20th century, Jingdezhen was recognized as one of China's "key industrial cities" in 1949, and it became directly controlled by the central government.¹⁴ Since 1950, the Jingdezhen ceramic industry entered the development stage in the planned economy period.¹⁵ Under the lead of the central government, the Jingdezhen local government began the socialist transformation of a porcelain factory designed as Ming and Qing¹⁶ imperial kiln factories. This transformation included three aspects.

First, a process designed to produce high-tier, boutique ceramic products for nobilities was transformed into large-scale manufacturing factory system, intended to achieve the maximum production and industry development under the strategy of planned economy. During that time, the role of the ceramic industry in Jingdezhen transformed into providing the household ceramic products for Chinese citizens as required by the planners from central government. From 1950 to 1962, with the lead from central government, the Jingdezhen municipal government successively established a number of enterprises producing daily-use porcelain and painted porcelain according to the plan of porcelain industry manufacturing and development, to satisfy the requirements from the central government. Those ceramic factories were called the "Ten Porcelain Enterprises,"¹⁷ which were the most famous and influential ceramic state-owned enterprises in Chinese ceramic history.

Second, the distribution of ceramic artists and workers changed from a dispersed and irregular form to a lumped and homogeneous form. Before the large-scale existence of SOEs, ceramic enterprises were individual artist studios or family business, which were dispersed throughout Jingdezhen urban areas. During the most prosperous period for the "Ten Porcelain Enterprises," they employed around 40,000 total employees while at the same time Jingdezhen only had a total population of 84,000.¹⁸ If we exclude the children and the elderly, this number means almost 98% of the total population in Jingdezhen worked for state-owned ceramic enterprises.¹⁹

Third, the investment in those SOEs were all from the central government, while all outputs and profits belonged to central government as well. In the beginning of the 1980s, SOEs accounted for over 75% of China's total industry output value. In the city of Jingdezhen, this number was higher than 95% since the main city industry was ceramics and ceramics all belonged to the state.²⁰ According to a government officer in charge of the ceramic

industry planning and development in Jingdezhen, Jingdezhen's ceramic industry was the main support of the Jiangxi province economic output:

Before the 1990s, the total output of the ceramic SOEs was RMB 400 million each year [around USD 83.6 million based on the 1990 currency]. At that time, the total population of Jingdezhen city only took 3% of the total population of Jiangxi province, but the tax revenue of which accounted for more than 20% in Jiangxi province, which made Jingdezhen one of the most industrial base city in Jiangxi province.²¹

Thus, Jingdezhen is a representative case of the production of Chinese artifacts under the dominant central government. The bright side of the central-led development pattern is that it largely increases production volume and standardizes ceramic enterprises and working processes. However, the decreasing number of creative design patents indicates a more conservative development of the industry at the Jingdezhen local level.²² The SOEs served the state as production machines, maximizing industrialization profits and development in the period of the command economy. State planners give instructions of exactly what to produce, how much to produce, and at what price inputs were acquired, using the bureaucratic allocations from the central to the local government.²³

Longquan: Local-led Development

Longquan is one of the most significant ceramic clusters in China, with a high reputation for its celadon products. In the history of Longquan ceramic industry development, the local government plays a crucial role in restoration, coordination with the business market, public administration, and support for talented people support at the local level.

Longquan is located in the southwestern part of Zhejiang Province, bordering Fujian Province to the southwest (Figure 5). According to the 2017 National Census Report on Zhejiang Province, this county-level city has 290,000 people.

Figure 5. Location of Longquan in Zhejiang Province.

Ancient Longquan celadon has gone through six development periods: 1) the emerging period, from the Three Kingdoms age (220-280) to the Tang dynasty (618-907); 2) the growing period, from the end of the Tang dynasty to the beginning of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127); 3) the middle period, from the late Northern Song dynasty to the beginning of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279); 4) the peak period, from the

Southern Song dynasty to the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368); 5) the prosperous period, from the Yuan dynasty to the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644); and 6) the decline period, from the late Ming dynasty to the Qing dynasty (1636-1912). By the time socialist new China was established in 1949, the Longquan celadon production skills and glazing techniques were almost extinct.²⁴

Longquan celadon industry began to recover after the 1950s. The local government broadcasted for those with celadon-producing skills and glazing techniques to come the city, and offered favorable financial and spatial support. According to an interview with an elderly celadon artist in Longquan, local government officials went door to door visiting Longquan citizens seeking those who had celadon producing and glazing skills, and those who wanted to make efforts to recover the Longquan celadon industry.²⁵ The *Longquan Celadon Restoration Working Group* was set up under the leadership of Guozhen Li, one of the celadon artists in Longquan, and the local government in 1959.²⁶ In looking for the mechanics of producing Longquan celadon, working group experts and technicians, and descendants of Longquan celadon craftsmen used modern science and technology to test the chemical composition of ancient porcelain tiles, and also adopted scientific formulas and advanced techniques to build new large-volume rotary kilns for modern ceramics.

At the same time, the local government retained the original distribution form of celadon artists' studios in Longquan. Instead of centralizing all ceramic enterprises in a designated, government-controlled area, artists were encouraged to find their own spots to set up working studios. Since the skills and knowledge to make many artifacts are handed down from generation to generation—along the lines of families or apprenticeships—decentralized distribution of artist studios gives artists more freedom to create their own ceramic products' design styles. The local government also published several regulations and official documents to support the ceramic industry. For instance, the *Plans of Longquan Celadon Industry Talents Cultivation* offered reward and tax reduction policies to encourage advanced, talented celadon workers, as well as younger generations to join the industry. *Da Kiln and Longquan Kiln Preservation Planning* established preservation measures for existing ancient kilns, with limited entrance to tourists and limited usage for local ceramic artists.

With strong support from the local government, Longquan celadon was revived, and was selected as part of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009 list. Longquan celadon is China's only ceramic recognized by UNESCO Cultural Heritage, largely increasing the reputation of Longquan celadon worldwide.²⁷

Mass-produced vs. Boutique Ceramics

Two modes of management systems influenced by different political power have led to two results in local artifact industry. The central-led development of the Jingdezhen ceramic industry has made the city play a role as an industrial accelerator for development policy and strategy, rather than a role related to the industry's cultural and artistic characteristics. In Longquan's case, however, rather than focus on profit-drive and large volume production, the local-led development strategy and policies have largely emphasized and protected the local artifact's cultural essence and symbolic value. After the intervening decades, two significant ceramic clusters with long histories in producing high-value ceramic products have diverged in their developmental paths: Jingdezhen is on its path with mass producing artifacts with low symbolic value but high total output value, while Longquan has increasingly boutique ceramic studios with a small quantity of ceramic production, high symbolic value, and comparatively low total output.

Central-led ceramic industry development largely decreases the "distinction" of artifacts. "Distinction" here indicates the variety of industries in the city level, and the potential for mutual promotion between ceramics and other industries. Though the ceramic industry has been a dominant industry in Jingdezhen, historically many other industries also developed with the prosperous market of ceramic products. With the convenience of water transportation and the flourishing ceramic trading in ancient Jingdezhen, a large number of people like business people, artists, and tourists came and went frequently.²⁸ Thus, ancient Jingdezhen was ceramic-centered, attracting talented people, skilled labors, and other service industries to this commercial center. However, influenced by the central

government and its centrally-controlled management system, the establishment of SOEs replaced previous individual studios and their mode of art creation.

Strictures and requirements for inputs and outputs strongly limited the potential development of ceramic-related industries. As I mentioned in section 3, the majority of the population worked under the SOE framework and followed these requirements from the central government. Additionally, the state council started a program of the selection of masters and an assessment system including a professional qualification. The Master of Chinese arts and crafts is a national honor awarded to domestic craft artists. The professional qualification is mainly organized by the provincial government, which also influences the income and welfare of SOEs. The higher professional qualifications an SOE employee has, the higher income they will get. This leads those who work for SOEs to strive for increasing professionalization. However, because the qualification is issued and evaluated by a department of the central government instead of professional ceramic experts, it emphasizes a strong political image in the artwork. The pursuit for high professional qualification also restricts local artists and talented ceramic workers in creating ceramic products.

In another case, the Longquan ceramic industry is led by the local government, which has more autonomous decision-making ability in its development of the local cultural industry. Over time, artists in Longquan has made bold innovations on the basis of heritage. In the 1990s they replaced wood kilns and coal-fired round kilns with a liquefied gas shuttle kiln, which significantly improves production efficiency and guarantees ceramic production quality. The introduction of the liquefied gas kiln guarantees the quality and grade of celadon products, since this kiln's characteristics include that: the temperature rises during heating and the heat preservation and the temperature drop are easy to control; the temperature difference in the kiln can be as small as $\pm 5^{\circ}\text{C}$; and the atmosphere in the kiln is easy to control.²⁹ According to municipal reports from Longquan in 2017, there were 2,779 ceramic related patents at the end of 2016, with 297 national and provincial level patents among them.³⁰ These patents include innovations in artistic creation, ceramic material improvement, sculpting techniques, glaze techniques, and the forms of ceramic products. Jingdezhen had 884 total patents, with only 158 national and provincial level patents.³¹ UNESCO recognition of Longquan's ceramic traditional skills also helped Longquan to increase its global reputation.

Jingdezhen and Longquan share similar historical ceramic reputations and geographical locations in the Yangtze Delta region. Yet different strategies of political power and its management systems have led the two cities into diverging developmental paths. Jingdezhen's mass production earns the city output volume and standardized management in the urban area. Longquan's boutique production not only protects traditional heritage skills but also largely improves the local artifacts' symbolic value and cultural meaning in contemporary China.

Conclusion

From an industrial output view, Jingdezhen has done a great job in mass production and standardized production process. However, ceramic artifacts are different from traditional manufacturing industries, which are characterized by large volume production and reproducible products. According to the Chinese official classification, ceramics and the ceramics industry belong to the Core layer of the nation's culture-related industries. These products are usually those directly involved in the production of social meaning, with symbolic values, and thus those who work in this field are identified as involved in "symbolic creativity."³² In Longquan's case, the local ceramic industry involved creative thinking and cultural protection even during the industry's development process, which significantly increased the symbolic value of Longquan celadon products.

The balance between the political power of the central government and the local government has always been a research topic in China. In the Chinese context, a central-government-led project or industry always means it will get more resources, which includes both financial support and preferential policies. These favorable measures typically mean the specific project or industry will have a great chance to grow quickly.

The management of the central government is concentrated, standardized, and rule-driven, and thus easy to control, especially in SOEs. One of the problems is that the central government is located in the capital, but at the local level Chinese cities have different historical backgrounds and economic situations. Standardized management tends to make cities more and more similar. Like globalization's negative impact on local cultural products, nationalization has also made these cultural artifacts grow in the pattern of mass production, which dismantles core cultural values during the development process. In the case of Jingdezhen, thousands of years of reputation as producing high value ceramic art and products has been gradually transformed to reputation for large volume production and low artistic value.

Moreover, symbolic creators are crucial in developing an industry for cultural artifacts.³³ Centralized control of cultural artifacts and standardized production rules give artists and creators little space to create and design new products and technology. Jingdezhen's central-led development strategy gives artists, especially young people, limited space to create, since ceramic products have been given excessive political imagery instead of artistic meaning. Longquan's local-led development strategy, on the other hand, provides local ceramic artists and creators a platform to carry out their ideas in ceramic creation. In turn, this platform attracts more talented people and symbolic creators, especially the younger generation, into the city, which gives the city a sustainable relationship between artists, city innovation, and the business environment.

In sum, the central government plays a crucial role in improving the cultural industry from a national level, because it establishes the national development strategy and supports provincial and local governments in many ways. The cultural artifacts industry also needs a localized strategy because cultural background varies from city to city, and cultural value is the most crucial part of the products. In this regard, giving increased autonomy to the local government in developing its local cultural artifacts would positively improve cultural artifacts' core symbolic values and make the industry attractive to potential artists.

Notes

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of Chinese Arts and Crafts is the highest national title awarded to domestic art and craft creators who meet the standards and conditions, and who have long been engaged in the production and creation of arts and crafts according to the *Regulations On The Protection Of Traditional Arts And Crafts*. [↗](#)

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15. From 1949 to 1979, the Chinese government practiced a centrally-planned command economic system patterned on the model of the Soviet Union. [↗](#)
16. The Qing dynasty is an imperial dynasty of China, which was from 1636-1912. [↗](#)
17. "Ten Porcelain Enterprises" generally referred to the ceramic enterprises in Jingdezhen during the period of command economy. Actually, those enterprises contained 32 main ceramic state-owned enterprises, such as People's Porcelain Enterprise, Jianguo Porcelain Enterprise, Xinhua Porcelain Enterprise, Hongguang Porcelain Enterprise, Hongqi Porcelain Enterprise, Hongxing Porcelain Enterprise, Guangming Porcelain Enterprise, Shuguang Porcelain Enterprise, Dongfeng Porcelain Enterprise, Jingxing Porcelain Enterprise, Art Porcelain Enterprise, Universe Porcelain Enterprise, Weimin Porcelain Enterprise, and Sculpture Porcelain Enterprise, etc. [↗](#)
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